

CONNECTIVITY AND CHANGE:

How the Plays of Sam Shepard Influenced
My Short Career in the Professional Theatre
(An Examination, a Retrospective and a Proposal)

by

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ABSTRACT:

Over the following pages, I will examine the work of American playwright, Sam Shepard, specifically the play that I directed as my thesis production twenty-five years ago, Buried Child. I will follow this with looks at several of the plays I produced with the theatre company I founded while a student at UBC, Dark Horse Theatre, and will close with a look at another, later, Shepard play, A Lie of the Mind with an eye to how I would approach that play were I to propose directing it today.

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FORWARD:

The aim of this paper is to find and identify what influence, if any, the work of Sam Shepard and my direction of Buried Child had on the body of work I directed during my decade or so as a director in the professional theatre.

Prior to attending UBC in the MFA (directing and production for the stage) program, I had attended the University of Victoria for three years, acted professionally in Toronto for several years and returned to UVic to complete my BFA, with a specialty in directing theatre. Upon graduating from UVic with distinction, I attended Emily Carr College of Art and Design, taking film and video studies. It was while I was attending Emily Carr College that I auditioned for and acted in a graduate student production. This experience convinced me that my calling was in the theatre, and I applied for and was accepted into the MFA (directing theatre) program at UBC.

By the time I arrived at UBC, I had worked in virtually every aspect of the professional theatre, from tech and design, through front of house and bartending, to performance and direction. I had written several plays for production and written critical reviews of play productions for publication. I felt that I was well-prepared to learn the craft and art of directing and the program at UBC seemed well-suited to provide that education.

SECTION ONE

Chapter One:

INTRODUCTION: THESIS PRODUCTION

By the time I came to select a play to direct as my thesis production, I had considered several possibilities. I was rather keen on the plays of Samuel Becket, but Simon Fraser University students had recently produced Becket's Endgame and I wanted to find something unique. I was looking for something that was within my capabilities and yet challenged me to excel. I hoped to find a play that spoke to me with a message or idea which I felt needed to be shared with a broader audience.

The previous summer, I had acted in a production of James McLure's play Private Wars. This play was planned to play in a double bill with Sam Shepard's Unseen Hand. When prior commitments scuttled the cast for that play, we produced Cowboys 2, another Shepard play, this one a two-hander.

Shepard's earlier works were interesting, but I found them to be heavily reliant upon character with little plot line. His later plays, like Unseen Hand, had more substance and appealed to my rather conventional eye. I decided to delve deeper into Shepard's later works.

I enjoyed Curse of the Starving Class, but it was deemed too close in style to Beyond Mozambique (by George F. Walker), which I had directed months earlier, so I looked at the next of his so-called 'family' plays, Buried Child.

Buried Child captivated me upon first reading. The play spoke to me at a level that other works by Shepard missed. I felt that Shepard was writing about my family, about family in general, with all its dysfunction and pressures. He was writing about the pioneer ethos, brought under a contemporary light.

The family in Buried Child has issues, secrets that must be exhumed in order to be eradicated. I was at a time in my life where I was beginning to realize the dysfunction of my own birth family, and I felt Buried Child spoke to that.

The style of Buried Child is, upon first reading, naturalistic although the action is not realistic. The behaviour of the characters is portrayed in a way which seems natural, but their actions belie nature. This apparent paradox appealed me, and challenged me, and (given my emotional reaction to the play) I chose to direct Buried Child as my thesis production.

Chapter Two:

SAM SHEPARD BIOGRAPHY

Born Samuel Shepard Rogers IV in Fort Sheridan, Illinois, Sam Shepard began his theatre career after dropping out of agricultural college. Having grown up on a farm and worked as a rancher in his teens,¹ his sense of the farm and open space were imprinted upon him at an early age.

"I just feel like the West is much more ancient than the East... There are areas where you really feel this ancient thing about the land. Ancient. That it's primordial... It's much more physical and emotional to me. ... I just feel like I'll never get over the fact of being from the West."²

Shepard's first experience with professional theatre was touring with the Bishop's Company Repertory Players.³ When that tour ended, he naturally gravitated to the home of American theatre, New York City.

New York at that time was a hotbed of artistic innovation and exploration. Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, The Velvet Underground and others, fuelled a frenzy of new forms and methods of making art. The 1960's New York saw productions of Hair, Living Theatre's Paradise Now, and seminal productions written by Maria Irene Fornés, Edward Albee and Leroi Jones. Shepard states in a 1974 interview,

"I was very lucky to have arrived in New York at that time, though, because the whole off-off-Broadway theatre was just starting -- like Ellen Stewart with her little cafe (La Mama), and Joe Cino (Caffe Cino) and the Judson Poets Theatre and all these places."⁴

Shepard's professional play writing career began in 1964 with Cowboys (produced off-off-Broadway), carried on through the seventies and has continued to the present day. His writing has garnered him a multitude of awards and accolades, including eleven Obie Awards and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Shepard's body of work conventionally falls into three categories: The Early Plays, character-driven and often structured, according to Shepard, upon musical principals⁵; the three so-called "Family Plays"; and the Later Plays, which represent explorations of style and presentation, and sometimes move into topical material.

¹ Johan Callens, Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard, P.I.E. Peter Lang publishers, in the introduction, p17

² Amy Lippman in Rhythms and Truths, American Theatre, I (April, 1984, page 59)

³ John Lahr, New Yorker, Feb 8, 2010, The Pathfinder - Sam Shepard and the Struggles of American Manhood

⁴Th.Q, IV, No. 15 August-October 1974, p6.

⁵ Rosen, Carol, Sam Shepard: A 'Poetic Rodeo' 2004 palgrave, pp 16, 31, et al.

Chapter Three:

BURIED CHILD

Buried Child is one of the "Family Plays", falling chronologically between Curse of the Starving Class and True West.

By the time he came to write Buried Child, Shepard was writing plays which featured strong narratives as well as substantial characters.

"I'd been writing for ten years in an experimental maze -- I started with character, in all its complexities. As I got more and more into it, it led me to the family. I always did feel a part of that tradition but *hated* it. I couldn't stand those plays that were all about the 'turmoil' of the family. And then all of a sudden I realized, well that was very much a part of my life, and maybe that has to do with being a playwright, that you're somehow snared beyond yourself."⁶ and,

"What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything. Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. We all come out of each other - everyone is born out of a mother and father. It's an endless cycle."⁷

Buried Child was first produced at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in June, 1978 under the direction of Robert Woodruff. It was subsequently produced in New York, with the same director, at the Theatre for the New City in October of that year.

Of the New York production, critic Walter Kerr of The New York Times, asked,

"Is the play's opacity essentially a means of concealing or justifying a random mix of visual gimmickry, corkscrew narrative, insecure comedy, buried borrowings and a portentous symbolism that seems almost an afterthought?" adding, "I am not certain there is disciplined purpose, a mind dead set on making its inspiration clear. Evasiveness seems to me a weak form of theatrical life."⁸

The following year, Buried Child was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

⁶ Interview by Jennifer Allen, Esquire, November. 1988, p 148

⁷ Sam Shepard cited in "File on Shepard", compiled by John Dugdale, Methuen, 1989

⁸Walter Kerr, "Sam Shepard: What's The Message?" New York Times, 10 December 1978, 2,3

The play was revived at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in 1996 in a production directed by Gary Sinise, a production which subsequently played at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre on Broadway in New York. This revival production is significant because Shepard made extensive rewrites to his original script at that time.

The 1997 rewrites to Buried Child changed the rhythms of the play radically. The first edition is more sombre, weirder and mythopoetic, whereas the revised edition builds upon the myths with rhythms of humour and character development. The revised edition is a much funnier read.

My production, ten years earlier, was of the original, 1978 script.

My initial analysis of Buried Child explored the idea that the play was about familial dysfunction⁹ and by extension, cultural imbalance. This is what attracted me to the play in the first place. Subsequent readings of Buried Child revealed Shepard's mastery of form as well as his ability to mythologize icons of American culture, elevating them to universal status and relevance. The play's humour leavens its heavy theme and makes the play's violent action more accessible for a theatre audience.

⁹ See: Appendix for analytical essay from 1986 thesis production.

Chapter Four:

BURIED CHILD¹⁰ SYNOPSIS

Buried Child is set in the living room of a family farm in the American Midwest. Dodge, the patriarch, and his wife, Halie, are at odds. Dodge is weak and physically confined to the couch. Halie spends most of the first act offstage, upstairs in her bedroom, preparing to go out. She is going to arrange for a monument to be built for her late son, Ansel. Meanwhile, the oldest son, Tilden enters with an armful of ears of corn. Tilden is mentally, perhaps psychically damaged. He has a conversation with Dodge. Something happened to Tilden in New Mexico, he had some trouble with the law. Halie descends and in a heated moment, Dodge alludes to his "flesh and blood" which is "buried in the back yard". The subject is, apparently, not usually spoken of by the family. Halie departs. Tilden departs and Dodge falls asleep. The third son, Bradley arrives. He has lost a leg in a chainsaw accident and wears a prosthetic. As the first act ends, Bradley cuts Dodge's hair while Dodge sleeps, unaware.

Act two begins with the arrival of Vince and Shelly. Vince is Tilden's son. He has been away from the farm for years. Shelly is Vince's girlfriend. Dodge and Tilden fail to recognize Vince. Tilden has brought in an armful of carrots, which he claims to have found growing outside. He gives them to Shelly. Vince tries to remind his father and grandfather who he is. Dodge sends Vince out to buy a bottle of booze. Tilden and Shelly talk. Tilden tells her about a "little tiny baby" that "Dodge drowned" and is "the only one who knows where it's buried." Bradley returns and begins bullying Tilden, chasing him out of the house. He then symbolically rapes Shelly, putting his hand into her mouth. The act ends with Bradley staring at Shelly as he is about to cover Dodge's head with her jacket.

The next morning dawns at the beginning of Act 3: Shelly prepares Dodge a breakfast which he refuses to eat. They talk about hope. Shelly has slept in Halie's bed. Bradley is still asleep, on Dodge's couch. Dodge spent the night on the floor. Dodge again alludes to "bones in the ground" and Shelly attempts to unearth the truth in what Tilden told her earlier. Halie returns with Father Dewis, with whom she has spent the night. Halie is aggressive and threatening toward Shelly. She wakes Bradley and offers whiskey to everyone but Dodge. She dominates the conversation with references to her dead son, Ansel, and how life is filled with decay. Shelly attempts to converse with her, but Halie goes into a panic about Tilden, who has disappeared. Dodge and Bradley fight over Dodge's blanket. Shelly helps Dodge and Bradley turns on her, accusing her of propositioning him. Shelly retaliates by taking Bradley's prosthetic leg and demanding to know the "secret". At her prompting, Dodge tells the story of

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, Buried Child text references are from Urizen Books, 1979 edition of the play.

Tilden's incest with Halie and the child that was born and which he (Dodge) drowned and buried. Vince suddenly returns, drunk and abusive to the point of violence. Halie and Father Dewis retreat upstairs.

Dodge announces his last will and testament, leaving the house to Vince. Vince tells of his trip into town, telling of a vision he has had of his ancestry and lineage. Shelly departs alone. Vince chases Dewis and Bradley out and takes Dodge's place on the couch. Dodge has died, unnoticed. Halie calls from upstairs for Dodge to look out back. A miracle has occurred and the fields are filled with produce and green growth. As she is speaking, Tilden enters from out back, crosses to the stairs and ascends, carrying the remains of the buried child while Halie speaks from above, as at the play's opening.

Chapter Five:

BURIED CHILD ANALYSIS

The plot of Buried Child appears to draw upon the myth of the "Wounded King" in Celtic Mythology. The Wounded King is a keeper of the Holy Grail. The King has been injured in the leg and is unable to move about. As a result of his injury, his kingdom is barren and infertile. He can do little but await the young knight to come and rejuvenate the land. In some versions of the myth, he has a son who is likewise afflicted, but is able to move about and find sustenance, in the myth, by fishing. The son is thus sometimes called the "Fisher King".

Another possible source of inspiration for Shepard's play is Sophocle's Oedipus, with its themes of incest and patricide.

The Celtic "Green Man" cycle, where the old king dies and the young king rises to impregnate the queen, continuing the cycle so the queen's offspring can rise up to kill the young (now the old) king, may also have influenced Shepard's writing of Buried Child.

Whatever the sources tapped in its writing, Buried Child is mythic in its scope, biblical, even. The world of the play is a land of famine and "catastrophic" weather, the cause of which is a mystery and may be entombed in the earth.

The old king, Dodge, hangs on to life, in opposition with nature, which requires his death for its cycle to begin again. An omen occurs. Heralded by one damaged son, corn grows in a field no-one has planted for decades.

The queen, in mourning over her dead son, the favourite and the heir apparent, departs to raise a monument to him in the village square.

A prodigal (grand)son returns, bringing with him a young consort. No-one recognizes the returning prodigal, neither his father nor his grandfather, the king.

The king sends the prodigal on a quest.

A second omen occurs, carrots are produced by the same barren field. The second damaged son physically usurps the first, (symbolically) rapes the young consort and replaces the aged king on his throne.

Night passes into day.

The queen returns with a holy man and does battle with the young consort.

The prodigal returns, transformed by his quest.

The queen recognizes the prodigal and vanquishes the consort, ascending to her chamber, above. The old king has died, the brutal son is banished and the young king assumes the throne.

The damaged first son returns the object of mystery, the incestuous fruit of their union, to its rightful place with the queen.

The cyclical order of nature is restored.

In Buried Child, Shepard offers his mythopoetic vision of a dysfunctional American culture.

Shepard creates an environment in which the cycle of nature has been disrupted, not because of the incest, which is the mystery at the heart of the play, but because the old king, Dodge, has refused to acknowledge Tilden's right to ascension, killing the baby born of Tilden's incestuous union with his mother, Halie. Dodge refuses to die, blocking the young king's rightful ascension to the throne. Dodge's refusal has crippled Tilden. The cycle is broken and the land is barren.

Tilden is sensitive to nature, a 'feminine' attribute, further distancing him from power. His stature is that of an emasculated male in the macho world of the play.

Bradley, the other living son, is fierce enough to become king, but is perverse and crippled (ie: incomplete, wounded) and also cannot ascend, although he aspires to do so.

It is Vincent, Tilden's son, who proves himself capable of the violence and bravery, not to mention bravado, necessary to ascend. Vince successfully completes the quest set him by Dodge and in fulfilling it, frees both Dodge to die and Tilden to unearth the play's mystery, the buried child, and return it to Halie, thus resetting the balance.

The potent young king is on the throne, the fertile queen is in her tower and the land is fertile and productive once again.

At the time Shepard was writing, the family farm in America was undergoing a crises of 'catastrophic' proportions. Corporate farms were driving the family farm into extinction. The death of the traditional farmstead provides the backdrop for Shepard to explore the dynamics of gender as they affect American culture.

In his exploration, Shepard finds that male domination has crippled American culture and made it effectively infertile and indicates that a return of balance between male and female attributes may lead to a restoration of cultural health. Drawing upon pagan archetypes and beliefs in cyclical nature, Shepard applies

this philosophical view in Buried Child, elevating the mundane to mythic proportions.

Foreshadowed by Tilden's discovery of the land's bounty, Vincent's initial return acts as a catalyst for change. Shelley's emasculation of Bradley and nurturing of Dodge pave the way for change, as does Halie's successful negotiation with the holy man of a fitting monument to the fallen son. Vincent's completion of his quest frees Dodge from the bounds of his unnaturally lengthy reign, allowing him to die and make way for the restoration of order.

Vincent's assent does not, however, assure that the old order, while re-established, will be restored intact.

As Vincent stares at the ceiling from Dodge's former position on the couch/throne, Tilden climbs the stairway to Halie's loft, carrying the 'buried child's' remains and we hear Halie's disembodied voice heralding the land's renewal.

Halie's Voice: Dodge? ... It's like a paradise out there ... A miracle. I've never seen anything like this. Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain... Good hard rain. Takes everything straight down deep to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can't force a thing to grow. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You just gotta wait til it pops up out of the ground. Tiny little shoot. Tiny little white shoot. All hairy and fragile. Strong though. Strong enough to break the earth even. It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun. Maybe that's it. Maybe it's the sun."¹¹

This passage, coming at the end of the play, suggests that, while order has been restored, it is a new order, not merely the reestablishment of the old. The figurative (and literal) bones of the past will not remain undisturbed.

Built upon a central theme of cultural discord, Buried Child depicts a family and, by extension, a culture in which the male and the female elements are imbalanced to the detriment of the female. The play is a model of what is but includes, as its last action, the indication of a way forward toward a new harmony. Shepard does not go so far as to show us what shape this harmony will take. Indeed, he does not even let us know what will happen when the male and female are reunited.

Shepard's unwillingness to resolve this play is not intellectual laziness; nor is it a shortcoming in his ability to craft a complete piece of theatre.

¹¹ Buried Child Act III

"I think it's a cheap trick to resolve things. It's totally a complete lie to make resolutions. I've always felt that, particularly in the theatre when everything's tied up at the end with a neat little ribbon and you're delivered this package. You walk out of the theatre feeling that everything's resolved and you know what the play's all about. So what? It's almost as though why go through all that if you're just going to tie it all up at the end?"¹²

Rather than presenting us with a "resolved package", Shepard shows us a way forward but not the destination. In doing so, the playwright empowers us to define the journey's end.

While the significance of Tilden returning the buried child's remains to the child's mother, Halie, is rather clearer in the revised edition of the script, it is still not so overt that "everything's resolved and you know what the play's all about."¹³

In general practice, Shepard's plays indicate that the characters may carry on beyond the end of the playscript. In this, the plays are more like life than those of many contemporary playwrights whose works are neat packages, self-contained, with all dilemmas solved by the end of the third act.

Rather, Shepard indicates the way in which the characters might move forward toward future resolution. It is this suggestion of a 'way forward' that interests me about his work. It allows for directorial interpretation within the boundaries of his plays' themes and structures. Buried Child is not an exception.

¹² Amy Lippman interview "Rhythms and Truth: An Interview with Sam Shepard," *American Theatre*, 1, no. 1. 1984

¹³ *ibid*

Chapter Six:

UNITY OF PRODUCTION

While deconstructing Buried Child in order to prepare for rehearsals, I was struck with how well Shepard had connected each element of the play with his central theme. The drama of the opening acts, the violence of the characters toward each other, the building mystery and its repercussions, all lead to a concise denouement during the final moments of the third act. This moment is a masterly stroke, completing the play's action by anticipating the change about to be wrought by Tilden's return of the 'buried child' to its source through Shepard's connection the various dramatic plots.

Shepard's mastery of his craft lies in his ability to define his characters' dilemmas and put every tool at his disposal as a playwright to work at solving those dilemmas. Each element of Buried Child points toward an open-ended conclusion. According to the dictates of Shepard's writing, it is enough to indicate that there is a way forward, out of the problem. My role as director was to create and connect design and presentation values to this purpose.

My work with the set designer connected with the notion of dysfunctional relations. The setting of the play is the living room and entryway of a traditional farmhouse. We used a floor plan based upon Shepard's stage directions and then decomposed it to illustrate the decay of this family. We stripped the walls between the living room and the entry way down to their studs and then cut some of the studs off short, thus emphasizing the decay while at the same time opening the entry way to the audience's view. This served to emphasize the insecurity of the household and to bring Vince's violent smashing of bottles further into the home.

The floorboards of the living room were painted with a forced perspective, a subtle optical suggestion that the audience were inhabitants of the farm house, were included in this portrait of dysfunction. We moved the couch, Dodge's throne, from the 'up right' position indicated in Shepard's stage directions, to down centre, squarely facing the audience. These and other subtle adjustments contributed to support a unity of production which mirrored Shepard's attention to textual connectivity.

The intimate setting of the old Dorothy Somerset Studio presented a unique opportunity. Buried Child is a violent play. The violence begat of family dysfunction is intimate and threatening to all present. I wanted the audience to feel the unease of the characters, and felt that the intimacy of the Studio would work to our advantage in this.

While a couple of cast members balked at the proximity to the audience, once I explained why I wanted to place the play right in the audience's lap, every actor came on board.

I emphasised that, while the actions of the characters is extreme and sometimes beyond the pale, the acting style should be completely naturalistic. This caused some difficult moments for the actors.

The character of Bradley was particularly troubling for the actor portraying that role. Bradley's prosthetic leg was a physical difficulty, but it was playing the character's violence toward his father, Dodge, so close to the audience that was most troubling for the actor. Dealing with an actor's personal demons can be traumatic, but we worked through the scene, privately, one-on-one; then in rehearsal with only involved actors and a stage manager. Finally, the actor felt comfortable enough to reveal his character's emotional self to an audience.

Chapter Seven

BURIED CHILD IN CONCLUSION

Shepard's concise portrayal of the dilemma of the American male-dominated society can (and on occasion, has) lead to misunderstanding the playwright's intentions. His complex and witty satire on macho behaviour has often, mistakenly, been taken for aggrandizement of the same.

offers the stage, of the Shepard's to the
 "Buried Child, which concludes with appalling images of regression, nothing better. With the young Vince now ensconced on the sofa in Dodge's place and posture and Halie's voice reaching us from 'above staircase' somewhere, we have simply come full circle back to the beginning --- but with what hope for change? Tilden crossing the stage, covered in mud and carrying a small child's corpse that 'mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth' give striking, concrete form to the death and corruption, haunting failure and futility at the core of Shepard's world. This is not an image of resurrection, but of regression to the primordial slime, a grotesque enactment of the desire to return to the womb, and a sign of our destructive illusions..."¹⁴

and

his
 "Shepard's heterodoxy does not extend to his female characters; his characterisation of women is resolutely conventional. The women in plays are merely 'stage property', present only to uphold the privileged male performance."¹⁵

My challenge in directing Buried Child was in finding the delicate balance between promoting a revolutionary idea and propagandizing its opposite.

The care and attention to detail, the long hours of rehearsal and the encouragement I provided for the technical and design crew paid off in spades when my production of Buried Child opened. It was a moving, memorable production, lauded for its professionalism and gritty, truthful presentation.

My analysis of the success of this production led me to a deeper understanding of the need to connect every aspect of play production to a single unifying idea

¹⁴ Sherrill Grace Lighting Out for the Territory Within: Field Notes on Shepard's Expressionist Vision, from "Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard" Leonard Wilcox, ed. St. Martin's Press 1993

¹⁵ Ann C. Hall, Speaking Without Words: The Myth of Masculine Autonomy in Sam Shepard's Fool for Love, from "Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard" Leonard Wilcox, ed. St. Martin's Press, 1993

and the director's interpretation of that idea. I came to recognize that connectivity of production components was key to a successful production.

I carried this practice into my work subsequent to leaving my studies at UBC.

SECTION TWO

Chapter One:

Revisiting Several Productions I Directed Subsequent to Buried Child

Reviewing selected productions that I directed after leaving the MFA program at UBC has been an eye-opener for me. I now find several of the scripts simplistic and others lacking in substance or craft. I find myself questioning the judgement of my younger self in selecting some of the scripts, frequently asking myself what it was that I saw in a particular script. This assessment of my script selection abilities has reinforced my belief in the important role of the director in contemporary theatre.

It is a common adage that "a theatre production is only as good as its script." While there is some truth in this, I believe that the whole truth is more complicated. To begin with a good script is indeed desirable when producing a play. A good script can be subverted, however, if it is poorly interpreted or if the production concept is inappropriate. Interpretation and concept are the first tools a director brings to the production of a play.

This is not to say that a director imposes an interpretation arbitrarily, quite the opposite. As American theatre director, Robert Wilson stated, "Theatre that imposes an interpretation is aesthetic fascism."¹⁶ Rather, the director finds that which is within the script which speaks directly to him and uses his expertise to bring that forward for an audience. Chief among the tools he uses to do this is the concept.

Concept is what informs everything that the audience will see and hear in the auditorium. All elements in the production: set, costume and lighting design, acting style, even casting and promotion, adhere to the director's production concept.

Concept is based upon the director's interpretation of the script.

Working on Buried Child was the first time I experienced the strength of a production that was thoroughly constructed (and connected) based upon a concept that I evolved from my own interpretation of the script.

The play's unity of purpose affected me greatly. The interconnected aspect of the diverse elements in Buried Child is a finely crafted object of art. I subsequently came to look for it in other plays I considered directing. I began to think of it as the 'connectivity doctrine'. It was an ideal condition toward which I strived with every production I subsequently undertook to direct. To this day, I

¹⁶ quoted in Arthur Holmberg, The Theatre of Robert Wilson, Cambridge University Press, 1966 p62

am critical of plays and performances which do not connect all production values, all ancillary parts to a central idea or theme. It is surprising and somewhat disappointing how many do not.

There are many common threads throughout this production history that can be traced back to my thesis production of Buried Child, among them:

- the importance of design elements in light of the overall production,
- the adherence of production values to a central overwhelming idea and unity of vision ("connectivity doctrine"), and
- the necessity of tailoring a production to the performance venue while remaining true to the playwright's intention.

From January, 1987 through September, 1995, I directed plays with Dark Horse Theatre and one other company in Vancouver. I also directed outside of Vancouver, but for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on a selected group of plays produced in Vancouver.

Dark Horse Theatre was founded by myself, my partner, Rebekah Johnson, and Craig Duffy, a graduate of U.B.C. It was a producing company without permanent residency at a playhouse, which might have been as a hindrance, but in fact proved to serve the purposes of the company. It left us free to produce at various venues in Vancouver and to select those venues which best suited the production at hand. As a result, our production history included presentations at the Firehall Arts Centre, Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Station Street Arts Centre and the Waterfront Theatre on Granville Island, among various other smaller and non-traditional venues, depending upon the needs of the director and play being presented.

The productions that were directed by me tended toward traditional venues, primarily the Firehall Arts Centre.

Chapter Two

Ramona and the White Slaves ¹⁷(1987) and The Art of War (1988) by George F. Walker

I had directed George F. Walker's plays before and was familiar with his dark humour and social consciousness. It was therefore predictable that I would revisit his work with several productions during my professional career. Ramona and the White Slaves and The Art of War were both produced at the Firehall.

Ramona and the White Slaves was Walker's first full length piece, an angry, psychologically charged play which draws upon film noir style, characters and action in its rendering of a family in dysfunction.

The play's introduction states that "Time is at play..." and the play's scenes do not flow chronologically.

Ramona is in self-imposed exile in Hong Kong, circa 1919. With her are her 'slaves', Gloria and Leslie, two sisters and Frederick, her son, whose personality is fractured. Ramona is addicted to opium.

Cook, a police investigator, is looking into the death of a man on the street beneath Ramona's bedroom window.

Incest, drug addiction, and extreme body modification ensue and at the heart of it all is a mystery.

Ramona and the White Slaves is a Freudian journey into family and Walker's trademark glib dialogue and dark humour fuel that journey.

Ramona reveals her past experiences and how her present psychoses have their roots in religion and abuse. She indicates that she will continue, unabated...

Walker told me that during a troubled period of his life when he had withdrawn to his family's cottage for a week and returned with this piece.

The cast for my production were drawn from actors with whom I had worked before; two from Buried Child; two from my UVic days, and one who was a founding member of Dark Horse Theatre Collective.

I moved right into production for Ramona from my direction of Buried Child and carried with me a process which fostered unity of production values with the script through a strong interpretation and solid production concept.

¹⁷ Editions for plays referenced/cited are listed in the endnotes.

Both plays have strong stylistic premises, the "American West" in Buried Child and the 'film noir' genre of Ramona, which were easily distilled and presented with clear, broad strokes.

The humour in Ramona and the White Slaves is broader than that of Buried Child, which made it more accessible for a general audience, bizarre and violent though it was.

Both Buried Child and Ramona and the White Slaves are single set plays and were, thus, easier to build and fully realize. Set elements were carefully vetted and placed and their placement could have a sense of permanence in the eye of the audience, thus strengthening their impact.

Dark Horse Theatre was operating as a collective at the time of this production, which contributed to the connectivity of the production.

The Art of War was written by Walker as a keynote address for a conference on Art at Simon Fraser University, and had its first production as a staged reading at that conference. The Dark Horse Theatre production featured nine yards of sand on a set which I designed in addition to my directing responsibilities.

This play examines the need for vigilance in the face of cultural imperialism. Walker equates the philistine attitudes of the elite extreme political right toward culture with fascism and totalitarianism.

The Art of War features Walker's hallmark dark humour and gift for dialogue and quirky characters. It also includes several plot turnarounds and violence which is rather more comedic, 'cartoon' even, rather than realistic in nature.

"The beam of a flashlight. The sound of someone moving around, some metal clanging. Suddenly the flashlight is dropped. Darkness. A groan. A louder groan. A thud.

Pause. Lights.

We are in a small room in HACKMAN's house full of filing cabinets. BROWN is standing with his foot on JAMIE's throat. JAMIE is lying on the floor in front of him. HACKMAN stands to the rear, hands in his pockets."¹⁸

The play opens with the murder of a man, who we later learn is Paul Reinhardt. Hackman and Brown, the murderers, bury Reinhardt on the beach. Tyrone Power investigates with the assistance of his side-kick, Jamie, and Reinhardt's daughter, Heather.

¹⁸ George F. Walker, The Art of War, Scene Six

Tyrone Power is the central character in several of Walker's plays (Gossip, Filthy Rich...). A crusader for truth and justice, Power's nemesis in this play is Hackman, an international arms dealer with a fascist bent.

The play's action takes place in and around Hackman's villa on the rugged coast of British Columbia.

Power wishes to bring Hackman and Brown to justice by proving their complicity in his friend, Reinhardt's murder. He is unsuccessful, but escapes with his life and vows to continue his crusade against government corruption and international fascism.

The Art of War is a play about good and evil and the eternal struggle between them. Walker shows that this struggle will never end, but illustrates that the necessity of vigilance is paramount.

The play ends with Hackman and his cohorts escaping while Power, who has been shot, languishes on the beach.

My production of The Art of War, like that of Buried Child adhered to a unity of design with interpretation through my production concept.

This may seem to be a given, but directing Buried Child had taught me that all elements of a production are reflections or aspects of the playwright's central theme or idea.

This production was the first 'farce' that I had directed. I feel that I missed that at the time.

Chapter Three

Scientific Americans (1990) and Possible Worlds (1992) by John Mighton

John Mighton, a noted mathematician and philosopher, is also a Governor General Award-winning playwright.

Mighton's plays are similar to Walker's in their clarity of vision and simplicity of presentation. Mighton's humour, like Walker's, is dark and quirky. It was natural that I would gravitate to Mighton's work, particularly after I got to know the playwright and developed a professional working relationship with him, on more than one occasion workshopping his scripts and producing and directing first productions and Western Canada premieres of them.

Scientific Americans was produced for the Vancouver Fringe Festival and subsequently moved to an extended run at the Firehall Arts Centre.¹⁹

Jim and Carol are a young married couple. She is an Artificial Intelligence researcher and he is a mathematician. His area of research is used in the development of stealth bomber technology. This becomes a bone of contention between the couple.

Bill is Freudian psychologist who speaks to the audience about media and psychology. His expertise is Group Control.

As Jim becomes increasingly enmeshed in his work and colleagues' routines, Carol becomes involved with activists in opposition to the development of military weapons. Their actions result in a separation.

Jim promises to resign in three months, but becomes obsessed with a mathematical problem which he cannot resolve and breaks that promise, losing his marriage in the act.

Bill warns us that our future is in our own hands.

Once again, as in Buried Child, a dysfunctional group resides in an iconic contemporary setting.

We set the play on a desert, a bare stage with a cyclorama and with scenic changes defined by lighting and set dressing. The setting reflected the "inner desert" of practicing pure science without regard to its consequent uses.

¹⁹ Dark Horse Theatre developed a long relationship with the Vancouver Fringe, often staging 'workshop productions' as Fringe shows and subsequently further developing the piece for 'full production', part of what we called our 'development cycle'. At any given time, we would have one playscript in development, one in workshop and a third in production.

Moving this production from the confines of its Fringe venue (Vancouver Little Theatre) into the relatively spacious expanses of the Firehall Arts Centre reinforced the feeling of desert vastness.

Possible Worlds is Mighton's examination of the quantum physics theory of parallel universes.

Police detectives are investigating a bizarre series of thefts of human brains.

A man, George, is living several lives simultaneously. These lives are investigated through examining George's relationship with Joyce. In some scenes they are an established married couple, in others they are just meeting and she shows no interest in him.

Jim carries an awareness of the alternative "Possible Worlds" with him from one into another.

Variations in their relationship illustrate the importance of minor incidents in shaping the present and future.

Correlations occur between the two threads of action, the police investigation and the relationship between George and Joyce.

The various 'parallel universes' may be triggered by experiments being made upon George's stolen brain.

The playwright explores the idea that our reality may be shaped by our perception which, in turn, is shaped by our brain chemistry.

This production was staged in the Station Street Arts Centre, a small, square venue, not unlike the old Dorothy Somerset Studio at the University of British Columbia, where I had produced Buried Child. The ceilings were low and the seating limited. This was a very intimate venue, which demanded finely tuned moments and attention to detail.

Our budget was limited and production values suffered, but the actorly moments were well crafted and this production succeeded upon the strength of the actors' performances.

Like Buried Child, Possible Worlds required the actors to make leaps of faith in staging and performance. The actors' through lines, particularly in the George and Joyce scenes, are not entirely consistent. Mighton is playing with reality and yet realistic acting styles are required to assure that his intentions succeed.

Chapter Four

Escape Entertainment (1988) by Carol Bolt

Carol Bolt was emerging as a playwright when I lived in Toronto in the seventies, so I was familiar with her work and, when she sent me a copy of a play, on the recommendation of George Walker, I read it with anticipation.

Escape Entertainment had received a production in Toronto that was not well received by audiences. I felt that the issues raised and the quality of the writing merited a second production. It has important things to say about the domination by American media of the Canadian film industry and, by extension, Canadian culture.

The play features filmed segments and a partially environmental staging. Audience walked through a sound stage to get to their seats and the back wall for the first four scenes slides away to reveal a pristine film set.

Pancho, a Canadian film-maker, is shooting a project with Matt, a faded matinee idol with a drinking problem. The shoot is not going well, due to Matt's addictions and neuroses. We see some evidence of this in filmed sequences. Matt's ex-wife, Laurel, is now a high powered film critic who has built her reputation on trashing Matt's performances. Laurel is now visiting the shoot and has been invited by the film's producers to write a feature piece on the shooting of Pancho's latest film. Matt passes out again, while Laurel and Pancho spar about the Canadian film industry and she accuses him of selling out. He reveals that he knows about her pending move to New York and further reveals his exploitation of Laurel and Matt's history for his current film. Pancho's wife calls to say she has left him for his old friend who is also the script writer. Laurel and Pancho sleep together on the set, which is a replica of the beach house she shared with Matt when they were married.

The second act carries on to examine the nature of Canada's relationship with the US and indicating the potential for a hybrid art form which is nonetheless more Canadian than present, for its honest depiction of Canada's role in the relationship. More film clips are featured, some movie-style pyrotechnics and gunplay with a schmaltzy 'Hollywood-north' happy ending. Play ends with a Film Sequence of a palm tree being felled and a Canadian flag replacing it.

Like Buried Child, in Escape Entertainment an existing imbalance is addressed and a way forward is indicated, although no 'solution' is presented.

Facets of the playscript's theme once again became elements of the set and costume. The world of the play became the world of the audience, through inclusion by staging the work 'environmentally'.

I met and consulted with the playwright, Carol Bolt, on several occasions. Carol provided many rewrites and updates of her original script for our production.

Interaction between the director and the playwright was to become a hallmark of Dark Horse Theatre's production history, culminating, as explored later in this paper, in the creation of works which were written for and developed by me as Artistic Director of the company.

I will now briefly turn away from the work I produced with Dark Horse Theatre and examine two plays which I directed for PI Theatre of Vancouver, at that time called Pink Ink Theatre.

Chapter Five

Aunt Dan and Lemon (1989) by Wallace Shawn

Aunt Dan and Lemon is a memory play on the romanticism of fascism. The play is a memory play in the traditional sense, the character, Lemon, reminisces about her relationship with an influential relative.

Lemon is an invalid, confined to her bed by an unnamed illness. The 'action' of the play occurs around her, linked to her by her memories of stories told to her by her Aunt Dan. These memories have the cumulative effect, when coupled with her confinement (ie: inactivity), of resulting in a philosophy which is dispassionate and totalitarian. Shawn uses Lemon's condition to explore the roots of fascism in contemporary society.

The production ran two and a half hours without intermission.

This production was presented at the Vancouver Little Theatre space, which was in the basement of a community hall. It was a very intimate setting for a claustrophobic piece of theatre featuring a very large cast.

A personal highlight for me was the attendance of playwright Wallace Shawn at a performance of the play and receiving his feedback on our production.

The intimate setting was similar to that of the old Dorothy Somerset Studio, where I had presented most of my student productions. Lessons learned in that space, such as audience placement, staging and use of lighting informed and shaped many of the artistic decisions made for this production.

Chapter Six

Cezanne Syndrome (1990) by Normand Canac-Marquis

Quebequois playwright, Canac-Marquis' play examines grief, memory and the reconstructing of history in order to address emotional issues.

This is another memory play.

Obsession is explored through an examination of a Gilbert Martineau's grief (and perhaps responsibility) for the deaths of his wife and child. The spectre of Gilbert's late wife engages in dialogue with him as he ponders his responsibility for her death.

His feelings of guilt are embodied by the character of a police inspector, who questions the man relentlessly regarding his actions prior to the automobile accident which caused the death of his family.

Gilbert struggles with these issues through the action of reconstructing the demolished motor of the crashed auto.

The intimate space of the Vancouver Little Theatre placed the audience right in the kitchen of Gilbert Martineau's home, where he was rebuilding the motor which represents his guilt. Slide projections and live tig welding aided in evoking a sense of dis-ease for the audience, much like the smashing of real glass bottles by Vince (in Buried Child) had done.

Chapter Seven

Writing With Our Feet (1990) by Dave Carley

The Dark Horse Theatre production of Carley's memory play, Writing With Our Feet marked an intensification of involvement by the playwright in our production process.

Dave Carley is a script editor of drama with CBC in Toronto. Dave travelled from Toronto to work with us on this piece. His presence was welcome in this difficult process and quirky script.

This is a complex script, with two actors and several characters.

Jean Francois is an agoraphobic recluse. He lives in the garage of the home in which he grew up under a freeway onramp. His only contact with the outside world has been his sister, Sophie. Sophie has just died.

A plague has occurred in the world outside of Jean-Francois' garage/home and the government has decreed that all citizens must be inoculated. Jean Francois is the last uninoculated person in the country. In order to obey the law, and attend his sister's funeral, Jean Francois must exit his home.

Jean-Francois reminisces about his life and influences, which include aunts, cousins, his parish priest, an old girlfriend and the famous industrial designer, Raymond Loewy.

The journey of the play is Jean Francois' journey to reconciling himself with his history.

The journey into forbidden history is common to both Writing With Our Feet and Buried Child. Both plays offer history as the key to forward movement and resolution.

My work on Buried Child prepared me for WWOF in the areas of conceptualization of my interpretation of the play. This play featured a complex sculptural installation by sculptor Nicola Koscavich as its backdrop. All aspects of the production hinged upon my directoral interpretation, much as they had in Buried Child.

Chapter Eight

The Big Dick (1995) by Don Thompson and Robert Garfat

This was my first experience at co-writing a production which I then directed.

The Big Dick was successfully workshopped, once again using the Fringe Festival to produce a 'studio' presentation and continuing through rewrites and minor recasting to a remount at the Firehall Arts Centre. Our production was critically acclaimed and played to sold out houses.

The production was minimalist, using 'film noir' aesthetics and dealing with issues of men in the nineteen nineties.

Richard Stark is an 'old school', lone wolf detective. By turns admired and distained by the police, he is a principled and ethical seeker of justice.

When a transgendered acquaintance engages him to investigate governmental wrong doings, Stark is dragged into the world of the 'new male', including gay rights, cross-dressing and subjugation. He learns to accept practices and precepts which do not adhere to his outdated world view and, in doing so, solves the play's mystery and wins the favour of the play's femme fatale.

I had a vision of what this production could be before Don Thompson and I sat down to write the script. That vision was fully realized with the production at the Firehall Arts Centre. It was the clarity of that initial vision which guided this production and gave me the confidence to allow the actors to play with their roles. Our production was a joy, from the beginning of the writing collaboration to the final production at Kaleidoscope Playhouse in Victoria, BC.

The Big Dick was the final play that I directed with Dark Horse Theatre.

SECTION THREE

A Production Proposal for A Lie of the Mind by Sam Shepard

Chapter One

A BRIEF PRODUCTION HISTORY

A Lie of the Mind²⁰ was written in 1985 and premiered that year in a New York production at the Promenade Theatre, directed by Shepard. The play won the 1986 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play as well as the New York Drama Critics' Award for Best play and the Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best off-Broadway Play.²¹

A Lie of the Mind has been remounted often, notably in 2010 by the New Group at the Acorn Theatre in New York with Aiden Quinn (Frankie in the original production) directing. This revival won the 2010 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Revival.²²

In 1988, I attended a Vancouver Playhouse production of A Lie of the Mind and was underwhelmed by the play. I felt let down by the emotional distance of the production, for which I faulted the script. The sometimes bizarre actions of the characters did not sustain believability, as they seemed to be without an emotional connection.

After attending this production, I tried to read the play, but in his introduction to the play, Shepard was adamant that space and distance are paramount to the successful production of the play. I did not see how this could be so, given the production I had seen, which capitalized upon both the spacious stage set and the huge playhouse auditorium of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

I did not attempt a re-read of A Lie of the Mind until preparing to write this paper. This read was a very different experience for me from my earlier attempts.

²⁰ Text referenced is A Lie of the Mind by Sam Shepard 1986 New American Library edition.

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Shepard and http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/theatre_dance/shepard/shepard.html and Lahr, John 2010, The Pathfinder: Sam Shepard and the struggles of American Manhood, The New Yorker, February 8, 2010.

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Lie_of_the_Mind

When I re-read the script, I was swept away by its cinematic qualities. Given Shepard's career writing, directing and acting in film, this is not surprising. Diverse locations, vast distances, sudden scene shifts and, most importantly, parallel action, are all devices which are more intrinsically filmic than they are theatrical.

While A Lie of the Mind is one of Shepard's most structurally conventional plays the play's rhythmic, relentless movement toward the third act climax filled me with anticipation. I wanted to travel with the characters as they stepped out onto their newly discovered paths. I wanted to direct this play.

Chapter Two

PLOT AND THEMES

The story, told in three acts, is of two families, both dysfunctional, which collide after an incident of violent spousal abuse.

Gender roles and changing stereotypes are examined by the playwright in a style that begins naturalistically and ascends into archetypal and beyond, as we shall see. Shepard presents the destructive dilemma of contemporary society's gender roles and offers the potential for change.

Set in the states of Montana and Southern California and points in between, the play takes as its milieu the rugged terrain of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

and "Shepard reclaims his landscape, the 'true' West where he was raised, peoples it with transients... flakey, abstracted women; absented if not actually absent men --- their doomed, dreaming daughters and embattled sons."²³

Southern California is represented as a source of gender conflict, a place where women are self-sufficient, but confused, and men are angry, but dependent. Montana is a wild and untamed territory, where women are subjugated and subservient to men, who reign supreme.

Paradoxically, A Lie of the Mind is a structural exercise in connectivity. Every element of the epic script reflects the vast thematic distance between that which is perceived as 'masculine' and 'feminine' in American society. From the distant full moon, an archetypically feminine symbol, shining over Jake's phone call at the play's opening to the connection of the women through fire at the play's closing, the "actual" distances are reflections of those which are more metaphoric.

The plot is straight forward: motivated by jealousy, Jake succumbs to psychosis and beats his wife, Beth, to the point where she suffers brain damage. As the two are nursed back to health by their respective families, the play chronicles the families' dysfunctions and the changes wrought upon the women and men of both clans by the crisis. The two families attempt to heal their individual traumas by maintaining their respective gender role status quos.

²³ Christina Monet, reviewing the British production of A Lie of the Mind in *The Literary Review*, Mar. 1986 p25-6

While healing, Beth evolves a new feminine perspective. She rejects her submissive role with Jake, opting for a more egalitarian relationship with Jake's brother, Frankie. The patriarchal precepts which subjugate and limit her are abandoned and she proceeds into (for her) new ground and gender parity.

Beth weaves her new perspective from the whole fabric of wilderness. Through her feral efforts at reclaiming the matriarchy, Beth evolves into a new woman, strong and yet compassionate.

Jake's damaged masculinity is exploited by the men in Beth's life, while Jake's brother, Frankie, appears to them to be crippled (or emasculated) by his compassionate overtures regarding her condition.

Beaten and subdued by the men in Beth's blood family, the two brothers represent the best and worst of what Shepard sees as the contemporary American male role and both are found wanting. Jake devolves into animus while Frankie acquiesces into a fevered partnership with the empowered femininity of Beth.

Jake and Frankie's Mother, Lorraine, and their sister, Sally, abandoned by the two brothers, just as their father had earlier abandoned the family, reject the patriarchy, burning the house that was its home to the ground. They watch as it burns and will, Lorraine says,

"Sing a song maybe. Do a little jig. Then, just turn and walk away. Just walk."²⁴

Their rejection of the patriarchy is completed by this action. Whatever the future holds for Lorraine, it will be better.

Beth's mother, Meg, still caught in her subjugation, cannot hear her daughter's pleas for help. She invites her husband, Baylor, to bed. He accepts her gesture of subjugation and ascends to their bedroom, but her attention is caught by the glow from the flames from across the vast distances of the prairie.

Beth is caught in the no man's ground between Jake (animus) and Frankie (anima). She must settle the two extremes on her own. In a final generous and loving act, Jake saves her from taking action by setting her free from his bond over her. While Frankie pleads with him for solidarity and forgiveness, Jake leaves him in Beth's embrace. He has no place in the new future Beth is forging.

²⁴ A Lie of the Mind, Act III, scene 3

Chapter Three

SPACE AND DISTANCE

Shepard calls for "Deep, wide, dark space..." in his staging notes for the 1987 New American Library Plume edition of the text.²⁵ He continues, "The impression should be of infinite space, going off to nowhere."

The play's setting, between Southern California and Montana, seems to reinforce the thematic space of the play. It is a violent and broad work and needs space, distance. This is a play created for a large venue, and any production of A Lie of the Mind would benefit from such a venue.

What then of the emotional intimacy of the characters? Without an emotional connection, the characters risk appearing, as in the Vancouver Playhouse production, as caricatures rather than vital, living creatures. While A Lie of the Mind is not a play for an intimate setting, a level of intimacy is paramount. This is the play's challenge for a director and for the actors.

²⁵ A Lie of the Mind by Sam Shepard 1986 New American Library edition.

Chapter Four

PROPOSAL FOR PRODUCTION

I propose a production of A Lie of the Mind in an arrangeable space, configured in either thrust or runway style staging. This space must have adequate height in order to offer a variety of lighting possibilities and present a sense of open space and distance.

Underscoring the breadth of the production, costumes and set pieces should be iconic and representational, with little nuance.

Shepard calls for set pieces which are, in themselves, naturalistic, but stand alone, with no attempt at enclosing the action. He describes ramps and platforms in space, which are nevertheless solid and fixed in that space.

Likewise, costumes should appear naturalistic, but without intricate or overt patterns and distraction. Costumes which are *representative* of naturalism rather than wholly being so.

Further distancing the audience from naturalism, Shepard suggests that live musicians score the action and transitions of the performance. Accomplished "old time" musicians improvising upon traditional American music would fulfill this purpose, as they did in Shepard's premiere production.

Lighting which isolates and draws the eye to the action and transitions may complete the sense of uber-naturalism for a production of this play. Lighting can contribute greatly to the sense of fatality, the relentless drive toward the play's concluding moments.

Shepard has a history of collaboration with other playwrights, actors, musicians and designers. His scripts are often incomplete at the beginning of a production's rehearsal period. During rehearsal he incorporates input from other collaborators toward a 'complete' production and final script.

Music, in particular, plays an important role in Shepard's construction of his productions of his own work.

"From time to time I've practiced Jack Kerouac's discovery of jazz-sketching with words. Following the exact same principles as a musician does when he's jamming."²⁶ and

"If an actor has any kind of chops at all, he's going to find his own way 'round the stage and find the impulses..."²⁷

Jazz musician Charles Mingus (whose son, Charles Mingus, Jr. was a close friend of Shepard) used the same sort of improvisational technique in his composition process.

During the rehearsal period for the Magic Theatre production of The Late Henry Moss (2000) T-Bone Burnett, a long-time collaborator with Shepard, sat in the theatre and improvised guitar music during the scene work.²⁸

In A Lie of the Mind, Shepard extends this collaborative approach to include the audience. Loose narratives, images and actions suggest, rather than explicitly define, the experience, giving the play a dream-like quality. The openness afforded the actors and design team also manifests in the play's length and structure, so that, like the actors in rehearsal, the audience chooses its moments upon which to either focus or let float through to their awareness.

Of A Lie of the Mind, Stephen J. Bottoms writes "[the play is] awkward with intricate plotting, and is far more interested in a gradual accumulation of imagery and emotional impressions."²⁹ Endowing such painterly qualities to the play suggests a broader palate for the design team, introduces the possibility of a novel, transcendent realism.

In his introduction to the 1979 edition, Buried Child, Seduced, and Suicide in B-flat, Jack Richardson writes:

"Somehow, Shepard manages to strike a balance between naturalistic detail and the wilder, more secret landscapes of being. He has found a way of maintaining a tension between the banal and the strange that gives his plays the quality of lucid dreams."³⁰

All of the foregoing contributes to a style of theatre that has been referred to as "dream realism". Elements of this 'dream realism' conspire together to create a

²⁶ Visualization, Language and the Inner Library, by Sam Shepard, *The Drama Review*, Volume 21, No. 4

"Playwrights and Playwriting" Issue Dec, 1977 pp 49-58

²⁷ Sam Shepard: Storyteller, *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1994 H26

²⁸ This So Called Disaster, 2004, IFC Films, Michael Almereyda

²⁹ The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

³⁰ Quoted in Sam Shepard's Metaphorical Stages, Lynda Hart, Greenwood Press, 1987

cohesive whole which connecting with Shepard's thesis or intention, his "vision", one could say.

It is in this style, dream-like and metaphoric, that we may find the key to solving the seeming paradox of physical space versus emotional distance in production.

A dream is an intimate experience. Dreams are rife with deep emotion and personal symbols. This is the realm of A Lie of the Mind and in production, this element must be addressed in order to fully succeed in conveying Shepard's themes.

At times, the play drifts along in a dream-like reverie, such as the opening of Act III, sc.3, when Sally and Lorraine sort through the detritus of their lives with men and the Act II conversations between Beth and Frankie. Beth's reaction to the normalcy of her family home, damaged as she is, possesses a dream-like absurd humour, as does Meg's mistaken memory of her own time in the hospital:

"Meg: The locked me up once, didn't they, Dad?

Baylor: That wasn't you. That was your mother.

Meg: Oh.

Baylor: That was a long time ago anyway.

Meg: It wasn't me?"³¹

These scenes and others act as a counterpoint to the extremely emotional, sometimes violent scenes elsewhere in the play and yet, even that violence has a dream-like quality to it. When Frankie is shot in the leg, he is refused medical attention and suddenly the roads become impassable due to snowfall. When Jake is subjugated by Mike, having just crossed a several states dressed in only his underwear and a US flag, the violence is bizarre and decidedly the stuff of nightmares.

In production, then, a strategic design metaphor for this dream element is essential. Shepard provides us with clues in finding this aspect. The 'floating' platforms and ramps, the separation of acting areas along plot lines, the elemental set elements, live band playing old time music, all contribute and reinforce the dream perspective of the play.

³¹ A Lie of the Mind, Act I, Scene 6

In dreams thought is action. There is a singularity of purpose which is connected to content. Working with the actors on developing clarity of intent and action is of paramount importance in producing A Lie of the Mind.

Shepard has stated his abhorrence of naturalism in acting. In a 1991 interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard states, "I think [Lee] Strasberg... set American acting back about 100 years."³² and then goes on:

the "There is this whole kind of self-indulgent, neurotic belief that somehow purpose for doing a play for these actors is to work out their private problems. They don't have the sense of serving the script. It's serving their own... unravelling their emotional problems. Which is a disaster."

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Shepard believes that an actor should approach performance as "a fractured whole with bits and pieces of character flying off the central theme"³⁴, aiming "to make a kind of music or painting in space without having to feel the need to completely answer intellectually for the character's behaviour."³⁵

An investigation of acting styles toward discovering or developing one suited to this work is indicated. A naturalistic, "Actor's Studio" presentation of A Lie of the Mind could be, in Shepard's words, "a disaster".

³² quoted by Carol Rosen, in Sam Shepard: A Poetic Rodeo, Palgrave, 2004 pg 222

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ quoted by John Lahr in The Pathfinder: Sam Shepard and the struggles of American manhood, The New Yorker, February 8, 2010

³⁵ *ibid*

Chapter Five

SHEPARD'S "INDIRECT ACTIVISM"

In A Lie of the Mind, Shepard returns to the theme of cultural dysfunction that he had examined in Buried Child. Once again, he presents the audience with a dilemma and once again, he leaves his characters on the cusp of change.

While change is possible, in Shepard's work, remember, it is not articulated. The articulation, the architecture of change is left to us, the audience.

Through his choice not to resolve his plays thematic dilemmas, Shepard empowers the audience to make the last emotional and intellectual leap toward positive change of their own volition.

Unlike novelist Edward Abbey (Monkey Wrench Gang, Desert Solitaire) or Italian playwright Dario Fo (We Can't Pay, We Won't Pay, Accidental Death of an Anarchist) whose activism is overt and direct, introducing the problem and endorsing a particular action, Shepard engages in a kind of indirect activism, which demonstrates by example and in practice the conditions as they exist and resolutions based upon suggestions for potential action on the part of his characters. His works, both as a playwright and a film actor, support this practice.

In A Lie of the Mind this intention is paramount and while it espouses the dire necessity of allowing the female (anima) clear reign in American social culture, the play does not reveal the nature which that reign will take.

At the play's opening, Shepard places Jake's desperate confession in wilderness and under a full moon, which is a symbol of femininity and fecundity. The play's subsequent overriding journey is toward that moon, toward a predominantly feminine ethos.

Near the play's conclusion, Lorraine and Sally perform an act of immolation, sacrificing their paternalistic roots in a cleansing fire. Their action frees them to move forward, away from the flames and into the moon's glow. They are on the threshold of change. Where that change will take them is uncertain, maybe Ireland, but wherever it is, it will be a place free from the oppressive patrimony of their past.

Meg's position at the end of A Lie of the Mind, meanwhile, mirrors that of the audience, on the borders of patriarchy, gazing toward her spiritual sisters' glowing future. She, too, is on the threshold of change.

Chapter Six

CONCLUSION

Sam Shepard is a poet of the theatre. His work as a playwright is informed by his musicianship and his work in film. Further, Shepard's working knowledge of theatre serves his purpose as theatrical poet. He incorporates ideas of set and lighting design into his palate in a painterly manner. His understanding of theatrical minutia enables him to express his ideas more completely. His ability to put his diverse expertise at the service of his poetic vision raises his work above the ordinary. His gift in connecting these artistic components is what attracts me to his work.

Shepard's vision is of change. He says, "Plays need to go beyond just 'working out problems'."³⁶ Shepard sees imbalance at the heart of western culture and strives, through his art, to engage that imbalance. "I'm not doing this in order to vent demons," he says, "I want to shake hands with them."³⁷

Shepard's best work is open to interpretation in a way that many playwrights plays are not. His work teaches without dogma. It is not didactic. Nor is it conclusive. Shepard poses questions and rather than answering them outright, he sets his audience on the road to discovery. His role is more shaman than guru. His vision is transformative, empowering his audience to act without instruction, to change of their own volition, based upon their own conclusions.

Change and connectivity are the two elements of Shepard's work that influenced my own body of work as a director of theatre and they continue to influence me today.

- End -

³⁶ Lahr, John 2010, The Pathfinder: Sam Shepard and the struggles of American manhood, The New Yorker, February 8, 2010.

³⁷ *ibid*

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Appendix:

Analysis from Thesis Production, 1986

The play opens on a family torn apart through adversity. The members of the family, however, behave as though this were the status quo, an indication that the event which tore them apart is some distance in the past. Dodge and Halie converse (over a great physical and emotional distance) about the past and about the weather, which is "catastrophic" and yet monotonous. Halie's memories are romanticized and positive, Dodge's negative and cynical. A dysfunction is established.

It is Sunday, the end of the old week, and the play progresses to Monday, the beginning of the new. Sunday is Rainy; Monday is sunny. On Sunday, the fields are barren (to all but Tilden); on Monday, they are sprouting with life. Halie is dressed in mourning on Sunday; on Monday, she is in Spring pastels. On Sunday, Dodge is dying; on Monday (after he dies) a new patriarch (Vince) ascends. All of the foregoing place the play at the end of the archetypical Winter, proceeding into Spring. The cyclical wheel of life is beginning its upward swing.

The play makes heavy use of archetypes: Dodge is the dying king; Halie the eternally nurturing and fertile queen, Mother Earth. There is no heir apparent. Ansel died before fulfilling his potential; Bradley suffered an accident and is incapable of succeeding; Tilden might have succeeded, but failed the rite of passage into manhood and remains obsessed with his own failure. Tilden did manage to sow the seed of succession, however, as indicated through the "Buried Child" and the return of his prodigal son, Vince, who has passed the rite of manhood, returning home to take his rightful place. Just as Vince replaces Dodge, so, too, should Shelly succeed Halie, but the cycle which was interrupted by Dodge's inability to produce an heir has left Halie unfulfilled in her role and Dodge's murder of Halie and Tilden's child has propagated this situation. Dodge will not abdicate to any but his own offspring, none of whom are capable and Dodge is incapable of producing another. He refuses to recognize Vince's right to accession and effectively removes him temporarily.

Shelly temporarily replaces Halie, sleeps in her bed, provides for Dodge, cares for Tilden as one would a child and emasculates Bradley. When Halie returns, however, she has right on her side (Father Dewis) and carries a symbol of her fertility (a bouquet of roses). Shelly is the outsider and must leave.

Vince returns violently and Dodge dies, abdicating to Vince. Vince asserts his manhood and the impotent Dodge acquiesces. The play ends with the new "king", Vince seated on Dodge's couch, assuming the position of the old king, a position of impotence. Halie, still Mother Earth, expresses hope as Tilden the 'unmacho' male returns to her the lost potential of their union.

This final gesture would seem to indicate that the playwright feels that the traditional male attitudes bear no fruit. It is a call toward the liberation of feminine (soft, sensitive, nurturing) attributes in men.

This reading of the play would seem to necessitate a less "natural" style of acting than is indicated through the form the dialogue indicates. Taking character portrayals almost to the point of parody may be one way of achieving this style, which one might call "heightened naturalism". This style would emphasise the comedy of the piece and provide levity to what may otherwise become unbearably oppressive for an audience.

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